

**SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**  
**LABOR ARCHIVES OF WASHINGTON**  
**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS**

**LOU TRUSKOFF OF THE SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS**

**INTERVIEWEE:** LOU TRUSKOFF

**INTERVIEWERS:** CINDY COLE

**SUBJECTS:** Socialists; progressive Democrats; Cold War; Progressive Party; picketing; music; piano lessons; singing at home; political songs; singing Christmas carols; Vietnam War; conscientious objector; Peace Corps; folk music; Antioch College; United Farm Workers; boycott songs; parodies; anthems; American Postal Workers Union; King County Labor Council; Fair Budget Action Campaign; Northwest Folklife; founding of the Seattle Labor Chorus; Seattle Labor Chorus conductor; minimum wage; Sakuma Brothers Farmworkers, Henry Wallace; Julius and Ethel Rosenberg; Paul Robeson; Kevin Barry; Fred Ross; Cesar Chavez; Fred Ross, Jr; Bob Barnes; Scott Reed; Pete Seeger; Janet Stecher

**LOCATION:** SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

**DATE:** MARCH 27, 2015

**INTERVIEW LENGTH:** 01:00:38

**FILE NAME:** TruskoffLou\_SLCOHC\_2015\_Audio.wav

*The Labor Archives of Washington is committed to preserving the voices and stories of individuals who have contributed to the labor movement's rich history. The LAW presents oral history interviews as part of its contribution to helping curate and create access to a broad and inclusive historical record. These interviews contain the personal recollections and opinions of the individuals involved and, therefore, may contain language, ideas or stereotypes that are offensive or harmful to others.*

*Individual oral histories cannot serve as the sole source of historical information about an institution or event. These narratives do not represent the views of the Labor Archives of Washington, Libraries Special Collections, or the University of Washington, past or present.*

[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is a recording for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. It is an interview with Lou Truskoff. The interview is taking place in Seattle, Washington on March 27, 2015.

Lou, could you talk a little bit about growing up, where you were born, and what the date of your birth was? Just a little bit about your family life.

[00:00:35] **LOU TRUSKOFF:** I was born on April 25, 1940. Next month, I will be 75. I was born in Passaic, New Jersey, a small city in that big complex of mostly industrial cities just outside of New York City about 15 miles away.

I was born into a family of, as I describe them, working-class radical leftists. Growing up, all the literature that was around the house, all the wider extended family—because the extended family was all of the same mind politically—basically, a socialist worldview.

At the dinner table or at the holiday gatherings or whatever, there were always discussions, and often arguments, about politics. I absorbed all that, so that's what I see as my foundation, the roots of my political thinking that, over the course of time, evolved.

I guess I could point out a couple of things, specific happenings or events that made an impact on me. At the age of eight—that was 1948, so that was when Dewey was running against Truman, who had succeeded Roosevelt when he died in office—I don't remember my parents talking particularly about Henry Wallace prior to that.

I'm sure they were aware of what happened at the 1944 convention when Henry Wallace was almost nominated. But then, the forces of darkness conspired to postpone a vote and they scrambled around and found this inexperienced, lightweight senator from Missouri that they could easily manipulate. So, really, I guess you could say—I don't know how the historians are analyzing it—the vice presidency on Roosevelt's ticket for his last terms of office was actually stolen right from underneath him and we got Truman, who then, when Roosevelt

did die in office, acceded to the presidency.

In 1948, there were quite a few progressives and progressive Democrats, people who had been long-term supporters of Roosevelt and what he did, who were very upset by the idea that you had a choice between two people who were going to be Cold War warriors, really.

That was the big thing. I don't remember so much about what they were saying or what Wallace was saying about domestic issues, although he definitely had left leanings in that regard. But it was on the international question, and especially the question of relations with the Soviet Union—whether or not they were going to be hostile and adversarial and endanger possibly more war in the future or whether there was going to be a real peace, a real effort at peace and friendly relations.

A new party was hastily established, the Progressive Party. They had a convention in Philadelphia, which my parents attended, to nominate Henry Wallace for president. Of course, in hindsight, and what I know about third-party candidates from over the years, I wonder if they really thought they had any chance at all, if they were being realistic.

But there was a lot of excitement, and it was in my family that I could observe it. A lot of excitement about his campaign. My parents worked in it. I remember once going out with my father and a friend to post posters on utility poles and so forth.

The results of the election, of course, were very disappointing, but that whole thing, including being taken to hear a speech by Wallace during the campaign, made a real impression on me.

A few years later, when I was 13 in 1953, my parents along with my grandmother and I made a pilgrimage to Washington, D.C., where we were part of the picket line in front of the White House protesting what seemed

like the imminent execution of the Rosenbergs. Learning all about that and actually being in my first protest picket line certainly had an impact on me.

The music part of it, too—and I may come back to this later—just to touch on the fact that from a very early age—I guess from age three, when I can't have any memories, but I was told—I was singing songs and I was hearing popular songs of the time that I was hearing on the radio.

I like to say that pretty much, as far as I know, I never stopped singing. I always liked music, any kind of music. I loved radio jingles that we don't have anymore, commercial jingles. I can still sing a bunch of them today if anybody's interested, but I won't put that in now. [laughing]

My father was a pretty good musician. He played the violin, he played the mandolin, he played in a local countrywide philharmonic orchestra. At first, he wanted me to learn the violin, but I just didn't show much interest in that.

I did, at one point around the age of 10, show an interest in the piano. We lived in a small apartment. There was no room for a piano, but my grandfather had a tailor shop—my grandfather was a very skilled tailor—about two blocks away from where we lived, and where I spent a good deal of my time growing up. There were a set of rooms where he and my grandmother lived in the back, and there was room for a piano.

We got a secondhand piano from somewhere and I had piano lessons, which I really enjoyed, for about two and a half years. Then, when the exercises started getting harder, I wasn't willing to put in the practice time. I was interested in sports and girls and other things. [laughing]

I know my father was disappointed, but he never put any pressure on me. I did learn how to read music and got more appreciation for music.

My family was a singing family, too. Very often, when we'd get together, we would sing. When we'd go on car trips, we would sing. Some of that was also political music. My parents used to sing I dreamed I saw Joe Hill. They loved Paul Robeson, and we had that recording, among many other political songs. They sang Kevin Barry, about the Irish freedom fighter. Again, these were musical and political impacts on me.

[00:09:22] **CINDY:** Do you want to talk about high school or college or anything? Are you ready to move on?

[00:09:26] **LOU:** Yeah. I just want to throw something there about Christmas carols. My family were unabashedly—the whole extended family—atheists, and they were proud of being atheists. As a matter of fact, while teaching me tolerance for all sorts of other things, it wasn't that they taught me to despise or have prejudice against people who were religious, but they weren't very tolerant, looking back on it. But fortunately, over the long haul, that didn't have much influence on me, and over the years, I've worked with many clergy people and nuns and people of faith who have done a lot of good work.

But it's interesting that at Christmastime, it was because it had become, I guess, a cultural holiday, and immigrants especially wanted to fit in with the culture, so we did the whole nine yards. We had a Christmas tree. We did presents. We hung stockings. We didn't put an angel on top of the tree, we put a star, and I wasn't quite sure at the time what the star meant.

And we sang Christmas carols—all of them—because it was beautiful music. I loved it, too, so in school we sang them. I really liked it. That's just an interesting little sidelight.

When I was in college, about 19 or 20—this would have been, say, 1959-1960—it was just a little before Vietnam—I had registered for the draft, but I knew enough and I had read enough to know that I did not want to go to war and kill people.

So, I applied for conscientious objector status, and my draft board, for whatever reason—maybe it was because they didn't get many such applications, they didn't know quite how to deal with it—never responded to me. Never gave me a response. Instead, because I was in college, in those days, there were many liberal deferments, I had a deferment.

Following along after, there was a period of two years in between when I graduated before my wife and I went into the Peace Corps, where you also had a deferment. But I was teaching, and I'm thinking there were certain areas of teaching—maybe because I was teaching a foreign language, I don't know—I also had a deferment, it seems. So, I had a whole string of deferments, including marriage, which was also a deferment.

By the time we were out of the Peace Corps and we finished graduate school in social work, I knew that my deferments were coming to the end at that point, so I wrote—this was in 1967 or 68—I wrote to my draft board and said, "I realize that my deferments will be running out and I would like you to take action on my original request for conscientious objector."

I got a response. They didn't address the conscientious objector thing at all, but they sent me a new draft card. I don't remember the classification. It was a classification that I had never heard of, but it meant that I was no longer eligible to be drafted.

In the meantime, before I got that response, I had been going over all these scenarios in my head about what I would do, and what are my options? I had decided that I would just choose to face the music and see what would happen, see if my conscientious objector status could be approved on the basis that I had originally made it. I had always heard that you really needed to have some kind of organized religion to say you were brought up this way and taught this way, but I did it based on humanitarian and humanist grounds.

If I had to go to prison or something, so be it. But fortunately, I didn't have to face that.

I want to mention in the mid- 50s into the 60s, the folk music revival. I had heard a little bit of it through recordings that my parents and their friends had, but at Antioch College, right from the very beginning of freshman year when we were going through our orientation, we had a folk sing. I said, how nice. People actually get together with a guitar and sing these folk songs. It opened up a new world to me.

That happened quite often during my time in college. It wasn't too long after that that I got my first guitar. Never had lessons, but from observing other people, and because I have a good ear for music from listening to recordings, slowly, I picked up some chords and some strums. With a guitar, you can be satisfied. You get six or eight chords, and you have a capo and a few strums, and you're in business. You can sing hundreds of folk songs, which tend to be simple, musically.

I think my third year at Antioch, I was a dorm counselor of a particular wing of the dorm, a hall. I and my roommate were the counselors for that group. I met two freshmen, one of whom was a really good instrumentalist, and who idolized Pete Seeger, and thought that he was probably playing better than Pete Seeger at that point. He had a big ego. [laughing]

They liked to sing, so we would just get together informally and make up some arrangements. We did some Kingston Trio stuff and some other folk music. It was a lot of fun. It was just for our own fun. We would just get

together and practice a little bit and do these things. We eventually did perform at a talent show and made a recording. So, that was all fun, and more of my musical development.

In college, I majored in education and the Spanish language. I had a brief career in teaching, which was two years in a small, suburban New Jersey community. The first year I taught junior high school, which was eighth and ninth grades. The second year, I was in the high school, nine to 12.

I had my choice. I had five interviews and I think I had four job offers. But I chose this particular school system because they had started a program where they were beginning to teach Spanish in fifth grade, which I thought was really good.

I inherited the first wave of those students in the eighth-grade class that I taught the first year, and they were just a joy to teach. Something that was fairly new at that point was the Oral Method, where you didn't study boring grammatical rules and a lot of vocabulary, but not a lot of conversation. So, you might know certain Spanish words, and a certain way to put phrases together, but you couldn't be too fluent in the language. That's the way I had been taught in high school, too.

But this was much more emphasis on just speaking stuff, talking in phrases, narrating certain short conversations between people. Then, without even looking at the printed Spanish—so your eye wouldn't be corrupted by mispronunciations—you would pronounce like the teacher was pronouncing, and then you would get a chance to look at the translation. I loved that method and it really worked well.

In between my first and second year of teaching, Joan, my wife now, who was one year behind me at Antioch, had finished school and she had a job working in the New York City Health Department. We got married and we applied for the Peace Corps, were accepted, and went to Venezuela.

For me, that was a great benefit personally—not only just getting to know another culture and meeting people there, but for someone who was very interested in and had studied a lot of the Spanish language, having to speak it on a continual basis for two years really wired it in, so that these days, when I don't get that much opportunity to speak Spanish, when I do, I may be a little halting at first, but when I get into it and don't worry—don't worry if you're using the correct tense, just speak—it all comes back. It's in there. [laughing]

After the Peace Corps experience—my wife, even as an undergraduate, had always had an idea that she'd like to go into social work, so she wanted to apply to social work school master's programs in social work, and I was feeling kind of the same way. I'm not sure exactly why or what I thought I could better accomplish in social work than I could in teaching, and it wasn't like I had a bad teaching experience, but I decided, yeah, I'm going to apply, too.

We both went to the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work. When we were finished with that, we were looking over employment postings and saw this posting for Catholic Charities of Chicago, a very large social service, social welfare organization. We both applied and one of them was for a pilot program that they were doing in community organizing, where you would get hooked up with parish, and you would work with the clergy, with the nuns and with the parishioners to deal with neighborhood problems, neighborhood issues.

I applied for that. Joan applied for another job where she was going to work with the parents of Head Start children. That turned out to be a great experience for me in Chicago. I was placed in two different parishes. In addition to my work with the people in the parish, I also connected with some very long-time, well-established community organizations that had people who were very experienced in community organizing. Again, I learned a lot and hopefully, accomplished some things.

[telephone rings]

I was just talking about the work in Chicago and was saying that I think we helped people out, and there were some long-term problems. That was the first time that I had ever been in jail because we were working on issues around unscrupulous real estate people. There was a big influx of Hispanic people into this particular neighborhood and they were selling them houses that had defects that people were not aware of. Once they signed the contract and everything, it was too late.

We were protesting this one particular realtor who had an office in the area. Finally, I figured out how to get his address. He wasn't listed anywhere. In the early evening, we took a busload of people out to this guy's house, which, I think, was in one of the immediate suburbs close to Chicago.

We picketed his house, and as far as I know, we were on the sidewalks that were public. We were on the sidewalks, but when he found out we were there, he came out all incensed. He called the police and he pointed to a few of us, including me, who seemed to be the leaders, and said, "We're putting you under arrest."

We all got back on this bus and four of us—I don't think it would have made any difference, especially with the Chicago police and this guy being a realtor, but I wish at the time I had said, "Well, I want to put this guy under arrest. He's the one that needs to be arrested." [laughing]

We were processed and put into jail. Fortunately, we only had to spend maybe three hours or so before somebody came out from the organization and bailed us out.

Those were the kinds of things we worked on. We worked on simple things, like the need for a stop sign on this corner, which people had never been able to get. You have to put pressure on the powers that be.

We spent four years there in Chicago. Very interesting city. Very interesting politics. It's when the original Mayor Daley was the mayor, so controlled the whole thing. I think out of 38 members of the city council, only four were not tied in with the Daley machine, so you had no chance of getting anything good.

But in my particular neighborhood where I lived, we worked hard on a campaign and we actually elected a progressive. We got rid of one of Daley's aldermen and we got a progressive in there.

We decided that we wanted to go somewhere else. Chicago was very flat, not much natural beauty, and we wanted to explore the possibilities. It was a good time for us and we thought once we settled somewhere else and got back into a routine of a regular job, we may never be able to do this or contemplate doing this again.

I think, at that point, we didn't have kids, so that made it easier for us to just pick up and leave. I was 32 and Joan was 31. We never really did abandon the idea of having kids, it just never happened. We never discussed it that much.

At that point, I don't remember what we were thinking, but that might have entered into it, too. We said we're free and easy, and we've got some money saved up. Let's make a trip. So, we packed stuff—camping gear—in our Plymouth Valiant and we toured the whole country, really. We went all around, up and down both coasts and in between. It was great fun. We met a lot of very interesting people again. You do that when you're camping.

Then we went up to Vancouver and through B.C. and all the way across Canada, all the way to Prince Edward Island where, again, we met some really nice Canadians. Since then, since living in Seattle and making periodic trips up there, I've always been impressed by the Canadians.

After that, we swung down and we knew some people who lived just across the border on the Mexican side from Laredo. There's Laredo in Texas and Nuevo Laredo in Mexico. We knew them because they had lived in Chicago and Joan had worked with the woman as a parent of a Head Start child. They had a big, sprawling backyard there, and we could leave our car there, which we did.

We got on a bus, and by bus and train, we went all the way down through Mexico and into Central America. It was a great time. We spent a total of about a year and a half on that. Included in that, though, when we came back from Central America up to retrieve our car, we wanted to check out San Antonio, so we lived there for about nine months. We thought it was a possibility for us to relocate. It was there that we hooked up with the local United Farm Workers boycott committee. We got very involved with that.

But in the end, we had also stopped in Seattle and really liked it on our other trip, so we decided to head up to Seattle, and that's where we are after all these years. I think, after living in many cities around the country, I don't think you can beat Seattle.

As soon as we got here, we got hooked up with the United Farm Workers boycott group that was here, and we quickly went on to the quote "staff," which would have regular weekly meetings. You got room and board and five dollars a week, which was probably more than the union could afford, really. But people were really into supporting the farm workers during that period and I think a lot of people were very generous in their support.

Actually, at that particular juncture, I guess, in '74, it wasn't a union yet. I forget when it became—it was the United Farm Workers Association.

In any case, musically, in addition to learning some of the boycott songs, which were coming out of California, I started writing some parodies. That was when I first started doing parodies. One of them, I'll give you a brief idea. You might recall the Miller Beer commercial from way back. If you've got the time, we've got the beer, that great Miller Beer. Something like that.

This one went, and this was during the boycott of Gallo wines, who stubbornly would not sign a union contract. This was a little further down the line, maybe 1976, somewhere in there. We sang, If you've got the time, boycott Gallo wine, that bad Gallo wine. Boycott grapes and head lettuce. Join our picket line. If you've got the time, boycott Gallo wine, that bad Gallo wine. Just pick up a sign. Join our picket line.

There's a nice little ditty. We at least amused ourselves when we were on the picket line or doing whatever.

One of the highlights for me of those years working with the UFW boycott committee was we did a house meeting campaign. We got very well prepared. They brought in from California Fred Ross, Jr, whose father, Fred Ross, was a community organizer and had worked with Cesar Chavez in his early years. He was his mentor.

This was his son, and we got trained by him in how to run a good house meeting campaign. We all read the biography of Chavez, *Si Se Puede*. We discussed that. We all wrote scripts of what we would say at these house meetings. We had a very nice slideshow that went along with it. Then we practiced these scripts on each other. So, by the time we all were going out to our first house meetings, we were quite well prepared.

It was kind of a pyramid scheme. The idea was at your first house meeting, you really wow them. Somebody else there, or maybe two people even, will say, "Yeah, I'll have a house meeting at my house." Then you went there, and so forth. And it worked. It really did work. I don't know remember for how many months we carried out that campaign, but we really did spread the word, and recruited volunteers to help leaflet at stores, etc.

I think my community organizing kicked in there a little bit, helped out. Even some of my social work skills were helpful. Probably some of my teaching skills as well. It all fit in.

At some point, we stopped being on the staff, and there were some younger people coming along who were filling in. But we never stopped being supporters, of course, and were still working with the boycott committee. But Joan and I wanted to get some part-time work, at least, and I thought, the postal service. It was probably a decent wage, and they hire part-time. I know at Christmastime, they hire part-time.

Turns out, that's a whole different story. Those are called Christmas casuals and they only work for the month of December. But I took the exam and was hired. By the way, that was a time—I don't know what I scored. I scored something in the high 80s on that exam, and only maybe—that was in 1977. Maybe 10 years later, you needed to score almost 100 or in the high 90s to have a chance because all of a sudden—and there were improvements that were being made all along in terms of the contract and the wages and it became a very desirable job.

I was hired, and I was hired as a part-time flexible, but, of course, I found out quickly that it didn't really mean part-time. The flexible part was the important word there. Whenever there was overtime, you got to work it. So, I was working full-time and more right off the bat.

But I somehow got committed to it. I have to tell this story about when you first get hired, you are a hiree, but with a provision that you pass the training, and the only job they were hiring for at that time was for letter sorting machine operator. That's the mechanized, somewhat computerized mail processing thing that was taking the place of strictly hand sorting.

I forget how long you had to qualify, but if you didn't reach a certain level of proficiency by a certain date, then you were no longer employed. That was it. But while you were training, you were being paid, and you were allowed to come in and put in extra time practicing, because it was basically a keyboard operation where you have to key in parts of zip codes. You would start off at a very slow speed, maybe 20 letters a minute, and you would work up to where you had to be when you went to work on these things, which was 60 letters per minute, one per second.

You could come in and spend extra time off the clock on your own, so I said to myself, I would like this job, but I don't want it enough that I'm going to spend my own time on the training. Do or die, I'm going to qualify. I came down to my very last day and I was getting close and the time was running out. I did another run and I got 96 out of 100, which was the minimum you had to qualify. Four mistakes out of 100 letters. All right!

So, I was in, and I joined the union right away. Not too long after that, I became a shop steward. Started to go to union meetings and started to see that there was a lot to be desired in the local, not that anybody was authoritarian or bad people or anything, but they were content with what they had, and it left a lot of people out.

There were a lot of non-members working there. Especially also in the Filipino community, starting around the mid- 70s for quite a few years, there was a big influx of Filipinos.

After I had been a shop steward for three years, I was working on the swing shift, which had the most workers and the most grievances, so I was very busy. I got to know a lot of people, filed a lot of grievances. An election for officers came, and there was a group of people who approached me and said, "We want you to run for president."



I had no thoughts whatsoever of running for a union office. I'd only been there three years. They kept nagging at me and I finally decided, okay, I'll do it. I realized that there were a lot of improvements that needed to be made.

We had a good slate. We had a Filipino guy on our slate. We only lost in one race on our slate, and that was very close.

I was president for six years, proud of the fact that we were all on the same page, even with those people who had not been on my team or who had run unopposed. We all worked together really well as a team. There was no factionalism.

We introduced several notions, one of which was recruiting, outreach. We really succeeded in increasing our membership by a lot—by almost 50 percent.

Also, the idea of goal-setting and strategic planning just wasn't done before. And surprisingly, the idea of preparing an annual budget. They had never prepared a budget, and when our team took over, the local was nearly out of cash, nearly out of money. Absurd.

My best friend, who was one of the ones who had really egged me on to running, and who was the treasurer, introduced me, and we worked on our first budget. That was a big improvement in itself.

During the time when I was union president, Joan was working for the Fair Budget Action Campaign, which did a lot of work with low-income people, people on welfare. A lot of it was dealing with Olympia—the Legislature—taking people down to testify, stuff like that. Meeting with legislators.

Pretty much every year, they had a different issue that they were honing in on. My parody instinct came back and I started—their first issue was the revival of the adult dental program for Medicaid, which, some years earlier, had been eliminated. There were all sorts of stories of people who, because they couldn't get dental work, not only for their teeth, but once you get neglected stuff in your mouth, it starts affecting other parts of your body, so this was really an important campaign.

Joan's coworker at one point said, "We really need an anthem for this." She came up with the idea that this would be the "Molar Majority," the people who were fighting for the reinstatement of the provision for dental. So, I wrote the anthem of the "Molar Majority." I'll sing how the chorus goes.

We are the Molar Majority. Adult dental is our priority. We'll fight for our rights in unity. Together we will win.

We had a couple of verses talking about how bad it is to be afflicted with dental problems and not have coverage, and what needed to be done in Olympia. That started a whole series every year, when there was a new issue being focused on, I would write an original—actually, that wasn't a parody. That was an original song, an original tune. I did some of those, and I did some parodies. That was a lot of fun.

In 1988, after serving for three terms—six years—as president, I decided to step down. The two times I was reelected, I had no opposition. People were happy with me as president and I'm sure they would have kept electing me as long as I wanted to run. But I could see from knowing what was going on in other locals in my union, the American Postal Workers Union, but in other unions in general, that once a local reaches a certain size, of necessity, you would have at least one full-time staff person and sometimes more.

Of course, that wasn't the culture in my local. It had always been done on a volunteer basis, although officers, if they got time off of work—and I was always able to get time off when I needed it—would get reimbursed by

the union. But it wasn't the same thing as being completely free of your job, your responsibilities at work and being able to devote full-time to the union.

I found that even in getting a pretty liberal amount of time off because I worked on the letter sorting machine. There were always replacements available if you needed to be off for several hours or whatever. But that still wasn't enough, and I was putting in a lot of my own personal time. After six years, I wanted some of my life back.

I made a couple of unsuccessful attempts to convince people that this needed to be made into a full-time job. We had one very well-respected, long-time union activist—a woman who had held a lot of officer positions, never the president, and was very well respected, and she was very strongly opposed to doing it, not because she was opposed to me personally, but because—and there's some merit to this argument—once someone becomes totally divorced, in her eyes at least, from the workroom floor, then they're not as much in tune with the problems that people are having, and it can get to be a problem.

That could be true, but I think at a certain point, any organization—unions and whatever, all non-profits, etc—when you reach a certain size, in order to be effective, you've got to have some full-time people who are dedicated to doing that work.

I didn't run, but I stayed active in the local. I once again became a shop steward, and continued to be a delegate to the King County Labor Council—which, in my retirement, I still am. Uninterrupted, I've been a delegate to the King County Labor Council since 1983. That's a long time, 31 years.

I tried to do this as president of the local also. There were no end of very local problems that we had to deal with, but I tried to get people to see a wider picture, a larger lens, of what the union movement needed to do in terms of influencing our foreign policy, for example, and getting involved in solidarity with other unions.

I guess I just wanted to point that out about the King County Labor Council. I have, over the years, periodically made attempts—because you have to be elected to be a delegate, but mostly nobody wants to run, so if you just put your name on the ballot, you'll be on there and you'll get elected.

Over the years, I've tried to talk to people about the importance of it. We get some people who, at first, they're, "Yes, I'm going to go to those meetings. I think this is important." And they go to one or two meetings and then they find out that they're too busy with their steward's work or their office's work or whatever, and they just don't have the time. It's not as important to them.

But it's been important to me, and it still is.

I think the next thing I want to talk about after that is the Labor Chorus, which, in 1997, the Northwest Folklife was having labor culture and labor music as one of its themes. Bob Barnes, a member of our Labor Chorus still, and Scott Reed wanted to bring Pete Seeger out. They thought that was a great idea. When they contacted Pete, he agreed to come out, but he said, "Can you get together a labor chorus before Folklife that can back me up on some of my songs, maybe sing some of your own songs?"

That was the stipulation, and Bob and Scott set out to find somebody who could pull a labor chorus together. I'm pretty sure they checked with Janet Stecher, who's been our only conductor these past 18 years. You'll have to verify this with Janet, but I'm pretty sure they checked with her and several other people that they thought would be qualified.

They all turned it down. I think Janet said at the time that she was way too busy. They eventually came to me and I said, "I really like the idea of a labor chorus. I've thought about it off and on over the years. The only

thing is I don't think I have the qualifications to really pull it all together, but if I could find somebody who could work with me, I would be willing to work on it."

I contacted Janet, who was the best person I could think of, and she also said how she was very busy, but as a friend, she was willing to help me. We started to get together. Joan, my wife, worked on this, too, in terms of the publicity and the outreach. We all worked on that. We put notices in various publications, we sent notices to a bunch of union locals, and then just word of mouth to people that we knew, people that liked to sing, especially people who liked to do socially significant singing.

Janet and I started to work on some simple arrangements of union standards. We got help from Geoffrey Fairweather, who was the director of the New York City Labor Chorus. Pete had contacted him and was going to bring him out here the last few days before Folklife to buff up whatever we were doing, and then to conduct us in our debut performance.

In the meantime, we had about eight weeks or so to rehearse from our first rehearsal, which was about this time of year. I think a little earlier in the month of March, we had our first rehearsal. We had a lot of people. We probably had at least 40 people.

As soon as Janet started working with the group, I could see that she was going to be sold on this, and she was. We worked on the stuff, and had our debut performance, and we have been going strong now for 18 years. It's been great, and I'm just proud of the fact that we have improved along the way, we've matured and improved in our sound, in our performing. I think at this point, you could say it's a very stable group. We do have people who go, but we have people coming in. In just this past year, we had quite an influx of people.

Again, with the Labor Chorus, my parody writing and occasional original song writing kicked in, especially when there's been a need to cover a topic where songs are scarce or scant. I'll give you a little idea of some of the ones. Actually, the one on minimum wage was a parody that I did in the 80s for the Fair Budget Action Campaign because they and the State Labor Council and a number of other organizations were running a ballot initiative to raise the minimum wage.

I wrote, You work for minimum wage and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt. No matter how much I work or how hard I try, a minimum wage, I just can't survive. I think at the time it was, On \$3.35, I just—it's hard to imagine that back then it was \$3.35—can't survive.

Minimum wage continued over the years to be an issue, so I updated the verses and we incorporated that song into our repertoire for the Seattle Labor Chorus. In fact, I believe this Saturday, we're going to sing it at a benefit for the Sakuma [Brothers Farm] workers, the farm workers, who are battling their employer up there in Skagit County.

We need some more good songs about peace and putting an end to war. At one party that we had, we sang a doo-wop song by the Fiestas called So Fine. After we finished singing it, Janet said, "You ought to put some antiwar lyrics to that song."

I laughed, but then I thought about it and I did and came up with No war. No war. No war, no way. We know there's a better way. The world can live in peace one day. Woh-o-woh, yeah, no war. The rest of it was some good, simple words about knowing that that actually can be so because the people can make it so.

More recently, with the big danger hanging over our heads from climate change and global warming, a couple years ago, I had been to the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and heard a calypso singer I was very impressed

with, and the calypso beat was in my head. Shortly after that, I don't know how I got this particular inspiration, but I came up with What's Going Up? as opposed to What's Going Down?

As in, Hey, man, what's going down? Like everybody knows what's going down, what's happening, but what's going up?

I'll just give you a little chorus. Everybody seems to know what's going down. But what's going up is the problem. Carbon dioxide, that's what is going up and it's warming our planet all around. Yet we just keep on burning coal and gas and oil. It's time to leave those fossil fuels in the ground. We say it's time to leave those fossil fuels in the ground.

That's really got to be the mantra. All the environmental groups, all the scientists are saying it, and a lot of people who have a lot of influence are ignoring that, and thinking about ways that we can continue to live our high-off-the-hog lifestyle, a fossil fuel energy lifestyle, and still beat climate change because we can come up with protective measures, and we can do carbon sequestration, or we can do carbon trading.

That all just nibbles around the edges. It doesn't cut the amount of Co2 worldwide that's going up there, and that we're perilously close to going over a point of no return, really a tipping point. We're going to sing that one at our April 11 concert.

I also periodically come up with a verse or two in what we call zipper songs where, if we need to go out to support somebody's rally or somebody's picket line, and we sing some of these songs like We Shall Not Be Moved or Going to Roll the Union On, you can plug in new verses.

That works especially well with the Flying Squad that we've developed, where if we can't get the whole chorus, especially on short notice, we can get six or eight people to go out and lead, and sing some of these songs. That's been a lot of fun.

Wow. I think I've covered most of what I want to say.

[01:00:33] **CINDY:** I think it's been a great interview. Thanks so much.

[01:00:36] **LOU:** Thank you.